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Buffalo Niagara - How Are We Really Doing

Lawrence Brooks

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Buffalo Niagara - How Are We Really Doing

Abstract

There has been a lot of good news lately in Buffalo: Harbor Center and Canalside, RiverBend and Solar City, the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus expansion, new hotels and restaurants, even an uptick in employment and population. But most of this good news is economic, and there is much more to our region than just economic activity. These positive developments have prompted reactions such as “rebirth” and “resurgence.” But perspectives on Buffalo vary widely, depending in part on how long you have lived here and where you live. People who came of age or moved here in the 1970s experienced the rock bottom in Buffalo’s trajectory. From that perspective everything looks like up. But for those of us who were here in the 1950s, during Buffalo’s heyday, well, we are not back to that yet—back to the times when there were pedestrians crowding the streets of downtown Buffalo and stores open every night of the week on every block. And for people living in many neighborhoods, concentrated poverty and blight have been getting worse in recent years, not better, and jobs are still hard to find. So, Buffalo Niagara, how are we really doing?

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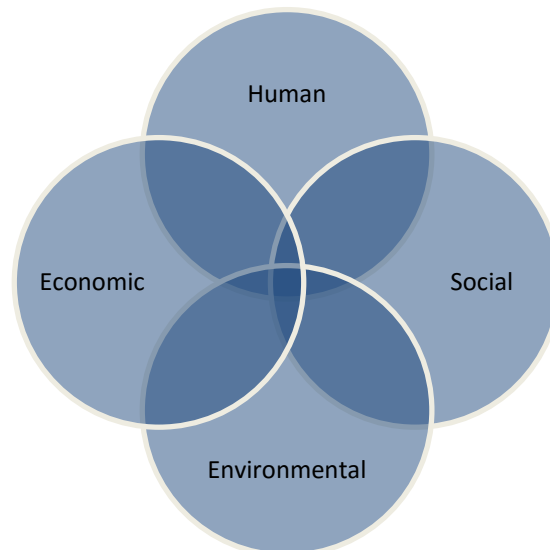
Buffalo Niagara — How Are We Really Doing?

Lawrence Brooks

Is Buffalo a Healthy Community?

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The four dimensions of a healthy community. The healthy community has all four aspects overlapping and reinforcing one another.

In order to answer that question fairly, we have to look beyond the narrow lens of economic news. The “healthy communities” model, developed by academics in the late 1980s and currently used by organizations around the globe, uses four dimensions: human, social, environmental, and economic. So we will look at the state of the region in all these dimensions.

The Human Dimension

The human dimension is largely concerned with population, education, and health. The Census Bureau has estimated that the population of the Buffalo Niagara metro area may have increased by a few hundred in the last two years, reversing decades of decline. Keep in mind this is just an estimate; we will not know for sure until the 2020 census. (Furthermore, realize that every year there are 1000 more births than deaths and more than 1000 refugees are resettled here, so that, if no one else moved, our population should increase by at least a few thousand per year).

Also good news is the fact that the 25-34 year-old demographic is the fastest growing segment in the region. But the rate of in-migration – that is, people moving here from other places – is still among the lowest in the United States.

When it comes to education, the region fares quite well. Educational attainment rates of high school or higher for the metro region are actually above state and national averages. Our region’s 13 colleges and universities have an enrollment of over 82,000 and an estimated economic impact of approximately \$3.8 billion, definitely a strength for regional human and economic growth.

Buffalo Niagara’s educational attainment is above average, with high numbers of residents completing high school.

When it comes to health, however, we encounter some bad news. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation ranks Erie County 54th and Niagara County 55th out of 62 New York State counties, making this region one of the unhealthiest areas in the state. The Foundation finds Erie and Niagara counties worse than state averages for life span, morbidity, adult obesity, physical inactivity, excessive drinking, alcohol-impaired driving deaths, sexually transmitted infections, and teen births. Many factors contribute to our bad health, including concentrated poverty and environmental health hazards such as polluted air, but the Erie County Health Department's Community Assessment blames lifestyle choices – such as poor diet and lack of exercise – above all else.

Social Capital

Social capital measures the quantity and quality of social relationships. It has become an increasingly important indicator of the health and dynamism of the community. In terms of family and marriage indicators, Buffalo Niagara is below average for the state and nation in the percentage of family households, married couple families, average household size, and average family size. When it comes to volunteering and philanthropy, we are above the national average for donations to charity, but below average when it comes to volunteering, attending public meetings, and being active in the neighborhood. Here is a disappointing statistic: Western New Yorkers (33%) are substantially behind the national average (48%) in organ and tissue donor registration, despite the fact that New York State has the third-highest number of residents in need of transplants.

Economic Capital

Our economic capital is a mixed bag. Our growth in employment and per capita and household income trails state and national averages. Unemployment rates in the metro region have hovered close to national averages, but unemployment rates in the cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls, and among people of color, run over twice as high as the regional averages. The region's housing stock – the primary capital for individuals – is the oldest in the country. While housing prices are relatively low, making us look attractive to outsiders, old, drafty, often uninsulated houses and relatively high energy prices make utility bills unaffordable for many.

Unemployment rates in the metro region are average, but in the cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls, and among people of color, unemployment rates run over twice as high as the regional averages.

The Environment

The region fares badly when it comes to the environment. Despite having world-class environmental assets – Niagara Falls, a natural wonder of the world, and the Great Lakes, which hold one-fifth of the earth's freshwater – we are letting our resources be degraded. The Great Lakes are threatened by climate change, diversion, pollution, habitat loss, and invasive species. We continue to dump four billion gallons of raw sewage into them every year. Despite the loss of industry, air pollution continues: in Tonawanda there are 53 permitted polluting facilities, which produce high levels of carcinogens such as benzene. Niagara Falls has the Covanta incinerator: the source of New York State's worst mercury emissions. The region has two nuclear waste dumps and the only active toxic waste landfill in the Northeast. We are losing precious farmland at the rate of 500 acres per year.

Three Major Challenges: Sprawl, Fractured Governance, and Segregation

Although there are many causes for the region’s shortcomings, and some are beyond our control, three major forces of our own doing are damaging the region: sprawl, fractured governance, and segregation.

Sprawl damages our region by diluting our resources – spreading them thin over a greater area. We were sprawling outward even when we were losing population, chewing up farmland and natural areas. According to the Brookings Institution, Buffalo sprawls at about four times the national rate. Besides the environmental degradation, sprawl raises the cost of living. For example, Erie County maintains more miles of road than any county in the state, nearly 50% more miles than number two Onondaga County.

Buffalo has been sprawling at four times the national rate, and Erie County maintains more miles of road than any county in the state.

Fractured governance keeps the region weak in terms of human, social, and economic dimensions. There are 64 governing bodies in the two-county area. Residents stubbornly resist consolidating duplicative governments, which would strengthen the region by building critical mass, and they do so all the while complaining about taxes. Local municipalities and economic development agencies compete with each other and poach each other’s businesses rather than working together to grow our economy. Local school districts are vastly unequal. In the Buffalo Public Schools, four out of five children qualify for free or reduced price lunch because of their parents’ poverty; this overloading of the system leads directly to worse educational outcomes for the children.

Buffalo Niagara is the sixth most racially segregated large metro in the nation, and it is increasingly segregated by income as well. Shockingly, over 80 percent of African Americans live in high poverty neighborhoods, compared to about 10 percent of whites. Segregation by race and income imposes many unfair costs and disadvantages on people – higher prices for insurance, less access to banking and credit, more expensive groceries, less access to jobs and social networks – and drags down the vitality of our whole region.

Buffalo Niagara is the sixth most segregated large metro in the nation, with over 80 percent of blacks living in high poverty neighborhoods.

Potential for Greatness

Despite its challenges, this region probably has greater potential than any other metro area in the country. Our Great Lakes water will increase in value in a world of worsening water shortages. Climate change will force millions of people to relocate from coastal areas; the

book *Climatopolis* ranks Buffalo the third most climate-resilient city in the US because of its inland coast. Few metros have the opportunities for reinvention we do, given the vacant land and underutilized infrastructure in the city of Buffalo. We could easily accommodate double the current city's population. If we could only think regionally and collaborate more with our neighbors Toronto and Rochester, we could create a megaregion that would be the 16th biggest economy in the world.

But it is not size we are after but quality of life – and a region that reflects our values and our vision of ourselves as a city of good neighbors. By working together to capitalize on all of our assets – human, social, environmental, and economic – we can combat sprawl, segregation, and divisiveness and build a region that works for all its residents.

So Buffalo Niagara, how are we really doing? Not as well as the most enthusiastic people boast, and not as well as the glory days when we were the world's first city lit by electricity and its six-largest port, home to the invention of air conditioning and to some of America's best architects' best works – but better than we have been doing in some time. By being honest and constructive about our remaining challenges, we can do better still.

A version of this essay was published in the Buffalo News, January 17, 2016. It is adapted from Buffalo Niagara; Diagnosis and Prescription for Change, by Lawrence Brooks, published in 2015 by RPSS. Citations for the statistics and facts can be found in the book.



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